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SUBJECT: YELLOW BIRD -- TURKMENISTAN EMBRACES U.S. NATIVE AMERICAN
CULTURE

REFERENCE A: YELLOW BIRD CABLE

SUMMARY

11. (U) Following close on the heels of its previous performing arts group Yellow Bird [ref A] , post hosted the Ari Roland Jazz Quartet representing Ethiopia, Iran, China, Japan, South Korea, Russia, Uzbekistan, Turkey and Estonia. In the background, the host government's ingrained urge to control made post's partnership with the ministry a struggle, but one that yielded further insight into host government expectations and behavior. End Summary.

Government's Urge to Control Cuts Both Ways

12. (U) Post thanks the South and Central Asia and Educational and Cultural Exchanges bureaus for their moral and financial support for this program. Yellow Bird kept its good humor throughout, despite a heavy performance schedule that included five performances for the festival, three embassy-organized public performances, two workshops at the Public Affairs Section, and one workshop each for the Ashgabat International School and at the Turkmenabat and Mary American Corners. The Ministry of Culture was pleased that post chose to participate in its first large-scale international performing arts festival, and in response set the group first on performance rosters, gave the group prime time performance slots, and acquiesced without protest to post's request to take the group out of town for additional programming. (Note: Post was the only diplomatic mission that succeeded in holding an independent cultural program with its delegates to the festival. End Note.)

13. (U) As expected, the Ministry of Culture laid great emphasis on control of the performers, the media, the diplomatic missions involved, and the public, sometimes at the expense of the cultural exchange for which the festival was intended. A lack of logistical planning in other key areas offset this attempt at control. The host government did not publicize times or venues for the festival performances, which meant that many members of the public learned about festival events through post's hampered efforts to advertise Yellow Bird. The ministry packed performance venues with students and government employees, despite high public interest in the festival. The colorful and entertaining opening performance (which included a short performance by each of the participating groups) was held outside a major new theater in the center of Ashgabat, but the police blocked the roads off so no interested members of the public could attend.

14. (U) The ministry did not plan ahead on translation for performances or performers and did not build in rest time to facilitate interaction between the foreign performers. The ministry tailored some performances to its own taste, which in some cases stripped them of meaning. For example, the ministry had dialogue removed from one Turkish dance-dialogue performance, leaving the audience puzzled. At one point post insisted that a PD FSN translate for Yellow Bird because ministry translation was inept. The same lackadaisical planning characterized the ministry's treatment of involved diplomatic missions: none were invited until the last minute to the opening and closing ceremonies, though the missions' representatives were expected to give public statements.

15. (U) Nonetheless, as the festival got underway, state media coverage of festival events -- including dozens of daily televised and radio interviews with performers -- drummed up wider-scale public interest in the festival and in Yellow Bird. Yellow Bird members alone gave over 15 interviews during the week and received full-color photographic and print coverage in the two main daily newspapers and on the government's state media website (septel).

16. (U) The Ministry of Culture offered greater support to Yellow Bird than anticipated, covering the costs of all hotel stays except one night in Mary, visas, transportation within Ashgabat, and all meals in Ashgabat and Turkmenabat. Post was glad the ministry assigned a representative to accompany the group, which facilitated logistics. It also gave post a chance to expose the representative to the American Corner concept and communicative style of program management.

The Coolest Thing Since Sliced Bread

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17. (U) Despite the customary bureaucratic hassles, Yellow Bird members were treated like rock stars in Mary and Lebap provinces. Lebap's new deputy governor, Annamyrad Saparmyhammedov (formerly the director of the Mollanepes State Drama Theater in Ashgabat), arranged a lavish dinner and breakfast, and free lodging for the visiting group -- nine people in all. He also insisted on ordering several dozen uniformed students to fill the front rows, which he thought would be a favor to post. Despite the reasons for their appearance, these students whooped and cheered for Yellow Bird just like the "free will" portion of the audience that filled the new 500-seat theater. Dozens -- mostly young people -- pleaded with theater management to be able to stand inside to watch the performance. Many waited outside for the chance to take photographs with Yellow Bird after the show.

18. (U) In Mary, the region's Deputy Governor for Education and Culture Shirin Toychiyevna arranged a welcoming ceremony by local dance groups in front of the new city drama theater. Yellow Bird participated in the choreographed welcome and began preparing inside as hundreds of spectators waited outside. The governor's office only allowed selected spectators inside the theater, leaving many empty seats. It was apparent that Toychiyevna was disturbed by the crowd's enthusiasm and was unsure how to control them. CAO and PD FSN suggested that either more young people be admitted into the theater or that the performance be moved outside -- which Toychiyevna agreed to do. The tension quickly morphed into cries of excitement when Yellow Bird appeared on the theater's front steps in the cold and windy Mary evening and performed for everyone who had come.

19. (U) Seminars at the American Corners in Turkmenabat and Mary were packed, with about 40 young people at each. In both places the discussion turned to the ethnic relationship between Turkmen and Native Americans. Yellow Bird's Ken Duncan did not confirm such a link, but retold an Apache legend which suggests the Apache were among several peoples who migrated from Central Asia and Siberia across the Bering Strait into North America. Yellow Bird's last public seminar, at the Public Affairs Section, drew about 50 people.

Still Paying Homage to the Ideal Turkmenistan

¶10. (U) At the festival's closing ceremony, the Ministry -- without informing post -- had Yellow Bird performer Vijaya Watson read a prepared statement in ungrammatical English. The statement praised the festival and Turkmenistan in inflated terms, and claimed that the festival "solved" the issue of international intercultural dialogue; post informed the ministry informally that this was an inappropriate use of the performer.

COMMENT

¶11. (U) Even with recent changes in the host government, the Ministry of Culture's organizing ethos still reflects Soviet practice -- and will continue to for a while to come. Yellow Bird was the ideal group for this arts partnership because the members' natural ebullience, a believed ethnic link between U.S. Native Americans and Turkmen, and shared cultural values such as respect for elders, created an instant bond with local audiences and the host government.

¶12. (U) The crowds that gathered in Mary and Turkmenabat demonstrated as much a desire for access to cultural resources as well as interest in Yellow Bird. In either case, post continues to serve as the facilitator of such access, as well as a trusted interlocutor between local populations and their government. End Comment.

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